

Letter carrier, who died on the job in Texas heatwave, received a disciplinary letter less than a month before his death

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Letter carrier Eugene Gates Jr. was sent a disciplinary letter for a “stationary event” and threatened with his job less than a month before he died on the job during a heatwave in Dallas, Texas.

Gates, a 36-year veteran letter carrier at the US Postal Service, was known as a diligent worker, who would often arrive to work two hours early. He collapsed on June 20 as the heat index in the area rose to 113 degrees Fahrenheit (45 degrees Celsius), the highest on record in the Dallas-Fort Worth area in over four decades.

This was Gates’s first and only disciplinary letter of his entire career, National Association of Letter Carriers local President Kimetra Lewis told local news station WFAA. According to Lewis, the USPS just started tracking “stationary events” in May, and the “event” which Gates was sent the letter for occurred on May 2.

A “stationary event” is “a lack-of-productivity infraction,” which is identified using invasive computer tracking of letter carriers. According to the WFAA report, “A stationary event is when a letter carrier’s scanner reads as idle on a tracker. In these instances, carriers are questioned about inefficiencies in their performance and potentially penalized for stopping along their route.”

This is a new surveillance and tracking system that has been installed, and the union, the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC), had to be fully informed of this change and allowed it to be implemented. The “Work and/or Time Standards” Article 34, Sections A, B and C of the current NALC contract makes this clear.

The definition of a “stationary event,” as the “the interruption of production,” is an incredibly broad

definition, which could include stopping for 45 seconds to have a cool drink of water in a heatwave, saying hello to a person on the delivery route or going to the bathroom. Nowhere is there a time limit or an exemption list to allow even the briefest or the most necessary interruptions of productivity in a letter carrier’s workday.

Yet the NALC barely lifted a finger to contest his disciplining over the new Work or Time Standard methods or the disciplinary letter and procedure he was subjected to. His disciplinary letter states, “On May 11, you were given an investigative interview with your NALC representative present and afforded an opportunity to respond to your actions.” With nine days to prepare a defense and a 36-year perfect record to stand on, the union could not come up with a credible strategy with which to defend Gates.

Gates’s wife Carla condemned USPS management for not making the start time for letter carriers earlier, leaving them on the job during the hottest hours of the day. In fact, the Postal Service had just moved up the start time to 8:30 a.m., an hour later for summer. During the summer, the daily high in the Dallas area regularly exceeds 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius).

Carla never knew about her husband’s disciplinary letter until after Eugene’s death. After finding out, WFAA asked her what she thought about it. She answered, “It is entirely possible this may have pushed him harder in the heat.

“Eugene was a professional. ... He was 66. He might be a little slower than others, and they tell him to pick up the pace? My god, that’s an insult to him.”

The start times were supposed to have been moved

back to 7:30 a.m. on the Monday after Gates's death. However, the USPS rescinded its authorization for this. The NALC's national leadership had nothing to say in response.

USPS continues to deny that Gates's death was heat-related. The results of an autopsy have not been made public.

The decision to discipline Gates was dated May 22, 2023. That was the same day that Postmaster General Louis DeJoy gave the keynote address to the annual Postal Forum meeting in Charlotte, North Carolina. In his speech, DeJoy reviewed his plans for massive job cuts and post office closures under the "Delivering for America" plan, which is aimed at improving the Post Office's profitability and paving the way for its eventual privatization.

The "new" postal service will be based off an Amazon-style spoke-and-wheel operation. It will result in the redrawing of least 100,000 letter carrier routes and cuts to at least 50,000 jobs. Letter carriers' travel time will increase significantly, and their pay will not keep up. They will pick up and deliver the mail at centralized Sort and Delivery Centers (S&DCs) located substantial distances away from existing post offices.

As part of this general restructuring, a new method of calculating compensation for rural letter carriers has been rolled out, which has resulted in longer hours and massive pay cuts to two-thirds of the workforce, in some cases of \$20,000 a year or more.

In the first year of "Delivering for America," only 1,000 carrier routes were actually relocated. This makes 100,000 in three years a tall order, but what is most significant is that the NALC and other postal unions are continuing to keep letter carriers and all postal workers in the dark about this dire threat to their jobs, pay and working conditions.

In spite of these massive attacks, NALC members are being kept on the job under an extension to a contract which expired on May 20, while talks have gone to mediation. This extension expires this Thursday, July 20. Indeed, that Gates was working at all on the day that he died was due to this extension.

If there is to be a fight in defense of jobs and for safe working conditions, postal workers cannot allow the initiative to be left in the hands of the bureaucracy at NALC, the APWU or the NRLCA, which are concerned solely with maintaining their dues base and

will do nothing to defend jobs. Instead, postal workers must take matters into their own hands, forming rank-and-file committees to establish lines of communication across postal facilities around the country, discuss and decide on a common strategy and organize common actions.



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